

see attachment

by W. SCOTT CAMERON



"SEDUCTIVE" IS A WORD RARELY ASSOCIATED WITH PROJECT MANAGEMENT. AN EXPRESSION LIKE "24/7," ON THE OTHER HAND, IS ALL TOO FAMILIAR. MARRY THESE TWO, AND ANOTHER WORD IS BORN: "E-MAIL."

SINCE E-MAIL GENERATES ITSELF ON A ROUND-THE-CLOCK, daily basis, it's not unusual for me to receive an average of fifty e-mails a day, or more than 300 a week. That's a lot of e-mail.

I have spoken with many of my fellow project managers about my relationship with e-mail. In my case, reading and responding to it is a temptation almost too hard to resist. When I receive an e-mail I tend to want to stop everything I'm doing, and open and answer it. Indeed, in my life you could say e-mail is a force to be reckoned with.

Interestingly, my fascination with mail began a long time ago. I trace it back to my days as a young boy when I started receiving my first letters from friends and family. Walking home from school, I was often filled with curiosity, wondering if I had received any mail that day. In college, I knew the exact time the mail was delivered, and I headed for my mailbox as close to that hour as I could. After that, I served in an Army Reserve Post Office Unit, where I came to realize how important a postal unit was to the military. There were many others like myself, far from home, who relied on the written word to stay connected to the people in their lives.

Over the years I have changed in many ways, and so has the mail. But the same sense of connection, and the same urge to respond to someone who has written me, remains. The 24/7 nature of e-mail has compounded the situation. It is relentless in its pursuit of my time and attention—and, as such, e-mail has become something I have had to manage in a variety of situations.

I've learned that being seduced by e-mail is far from uncommon experience. I was talking with another manager and he told me he was having problems with some of his younger engineers, as they were spending more time on their computers answering e-mails than on the shop floor managing their projects. He wanted the engineers to interact more with the people on the shop floor, and he felt this problem was having a negative impact on their performance and how their co-workers perceived them. When he confronted one of the engineers, the response he received was that it was the engineer's job to answer e-mails—not necessarily to be on the shop floor all the time. They both had a point.

Project managers must lead by example. As we continue to increase the amount of time we spend on

tasks like e-mail, so must we continue to improve our time management skills. We need to make conscious decisions about the minutes and hours we will spend staring at the screen and emptying the inbox, and how we will utilize this tool to our advantage.

What worked for snail mail, works for e-mail:

Back when snail mail was the only mail I had to contend with, a performance coach taught me a few tips that I continue to use today.

- Touch each piece of mail only once.
- Either pitch the mail or respond immediately. (As a last resort, defer action until another day.)
- Keep a minimal number of files so you're not tempted to warehouse a large amount of mail.

Another situation I've had to deal with is whether to take my computer on vacation or leave it at the office. After much thought and negotiation with my family, I decided to take my computer on vacation. I have received many comments about this decision (i.e. are you a workaholic, are you crazy, a vacation is for rest not answering e-mail). I really can't argue with these comments, but I have imposed some restrictions on myself so my vacation isn't just an alternative work location: I don't read my e-mail every day of vacation, I don't let what I read in an e-mail change the timing of any of our vacation plans, and I only access my e-mail during "dead time" when my family is doing other things.

I've reasoned taking my computer on vacation is healthy for me. It reduces my stress level upon return to work. While it's still easy for me to get excited about a letter waiting in my mailbox, coming home to 350 or more e-mails is hardly what I would call "seductive." •



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